

## **Assessing the Needs of Vermont Collecting Institutions**

Many of the findings in the *Heritage Health Index* are issues that Vermont has been trying to deal with since the early 1980s. The majority of collections in Vermont are held by small institutions with limited means and no professional staff. Vermont is a rural state with a population of less than 625,000 people. It has a long history of housing its artifact and documentary heritage in a variety of local public and private institutions. At the present time there are over 200 local historical societies, 180 public libraries, 246 town and city offices, 14 county court houses, and over 27 museums. Most local historical societies and museums are seasonal with no heat or air conditioning, let alone humidity controls. Collections are stored in basements or attics and frequently cramped. Security beyond good door locks isn't affordable to most groups. Emergency planning is a concern but written plans and ongoing training are lacking in many institutions.

On September 11, 2007 a meeting of interested parties was held to discuss how best to use the special opportunity of IMLS's Connecting to Collections Grant. Representatives from the Vermont Historical Society (VHS), the Vermont Museum and Gallery Alliance (VMGA), the Vermont Department of Libraries, The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, the Vermont State Archives, and the University of Vermont Special Collections talked about the next steps for Vermont's collecting institutions. Ann Lawless, Director of the American Precision Museum, Jeff Marshall, from UVM Special Collections, and Paul Donovan of the Vermont Department of Libraries, who all attended IMLS's June 2007 National Conservation Summit, were invited to describe the summit and its goals.

Participants talked about past accomplishments in helping Vermont collecting institutions. The Vermont Historical Society's League of Local Historical Societies was founded in 1953 to serve Vermont historical societies and continues to offer workshops and lectures on collections care at its annual meeting. A survey funded by the National Endowment for the Arts on the status of museums was undertaken by the Vermont Council on the Arts in 1980. As a result of those findings the Vermont Museum and Gallery Alliance (VMGA) was founded in 1984. Part of its mission is to educate historical societies, museums, and galleries about collections care. The Vermont Historical Records Advisory Board (VHRAB), administered by Vermont's State Archivist, was awarded a grant in 1983 to conduct a needs assessment of the conditions of historical records in the state. VHRAB found disaster planning was minimal and recommended that a plan be developed to provide information and training on the subject. Archivists and curators needed to do a better job of letting the public know about their valuable holdings so that funding could be found for preserving collections. Collaborative efforts needed to be made to offer training to the many nonprofessionals in the state who were responsible for the historical records. In 1987 the Cultural Facilities Coalition, which included VMGA, VHS, and the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, was created with an appropriation of \$25,000 from the State of Vermont to provide matching grants to non-profit institutions for capital improvement projects. Today the Cultural Facilities Coalition, now administered by the Vermont Council on the Arts, receives an annual state appropriation of \$250,000. VMGA's Collections Care

Program was launched in 1992 with a \$160,000 in funding. A Collections Care Director was hired and for the next fifteen years, workshops, collections assessment surveys, and conservation implementation grants were awarded (see attachment *Comparison of the Status of Vermont's Museum 1980-2002* by Zea). Unfortunately those funds have run out. In 1997 VHRAB began its regrant program, which has been used for holding workshops for records curators throughout the state (See attachments *Regrants and Collaborations: A View from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom*, Sanford and Lawless). In 2002 conservator Mary Jo Davis, working with VMGA, helped develop a network of curators, librarians, town clerks, archivists and other people with collections responsibility to receive training in handling collections emergencies. This team is now on call and available to help during emergencies. Luckily team members have only been used a few times for small emergencies. The Vermont Department of Libraries, recognizing that many of its constituent libraries hold local collections, has begun providing workshops on collections care and management, with a special focus on emergency planning. Many times during the last two decades all of these organizations have worked to preserve Vermont's material heritage.

Meeting participants then engaged in a lively discussion that raised many questions about the current needs of Vermont collecting institutions and how they are being served. What has worked for Vermont collecting institutions? What hasn't been successful? How many emergency plans are in place with ongoing staff and volunteer training? Where is funding for future needs to come from? Are there new challenges that weren't in existence in the past that need attention? Are institutions taking advantage of new technology? Are the same people still responsible for collections? Are there new collecting institutions with whom we have never been in contact? How do we contact or remain in touch with them? Do our communities know about their local collections and their special needs? What partnerships and coalitions might be formed to save time and money? In order to answer such questions, these statewide organizations, many with a primary mission to help collecting institutions, are partnering to apply for the grants funds from IMLS.

The partnership is requesting funding from IMLS's Connecting to Collections program to develop a survey to assess the current needs of collecting institutions around the state. The survey will be sent to all collecting institutions in Vermont including historical societies, libraries, museums, town and city clerks, and county courts. Using the information gathered in the survey, a report will be written describing collecting institutions' most pressing needs, with recommendations about how to meet those needs. The report will be used to raise awareness about these needs, to plan for developing new working partnerships among collecting institutions, and to seek private and public funding opportunities at the local, state, and federal levels.

The project will start in April 2008 and run for a year, ending in March 2009. The primary responsibility for overseeing the project will be undertaken by the Vermont Historical Society, which has staff and space available to work on the project. The project director will be VHS Curator, Jacqueline Calder, who will work closely with Eileen Corcoran, VMGA Acting Director and Director of Collections Care and Patricia Wiley, VHS's Local Historical Societies Outreach Manager (Project Team). A Collections

Advisory Committee (which includes members of the Project Team) with representatives from each of the partnership organizations (VHS, VMGA, VT Dept. of Libraries, VT State Archives, and the VT Division for Historic Preservation), along with other interested and knowledgeable parties, will be formed as an advisory group on this project. This committee will meet four times (May 2008, August 2008, September 2008, and January 2009). The committee's responsibilities will include: helping to develop initial survey questions, meeting with a consultant to review the survey, sharing their constituencies' contact information, helping with and attending a regional informational meeting, reviewing and commenting on periodic project reports and updates, helping to promote and encourage their constituencies to answer the survey, reviewing final survey results and helping develop recommendations, reviewing drafts of written reports and making comments, helping to plan a statewide summit, arriving at a consensus, and approving a final written report and recommendations.

If funding is approved work will begin in April 2008. Much of the work on the project will need to be done during the summer of 2008, since many of the institutions being surveyed are only open from Memorial Day weekend through Columbus Day weekend.

The Project Team and consultant Susan Wilkening will meet in early April to review the project and begin developing the initial survey questions. Wilkening's experience working in small museums gives her an understanding of the resource limitations of many of the survey recipients. Her advice on how to get the best results when writing and designing the survey is critical to the project's success. Her expertise in developing and analyzing the surveys will be crucial to the Project Team. Wilkening will work with the committee to determine what the committee wants to learn, design the survey, draft the survey, help with the online launch, and monitor the survey as it progresses to determine response rates and gaps in responses. When enough information has been collected she will analyze the survey results, draft a written report, and develop a PowerPoint presentation of her findings.

In April job descriptions will be posted and the Project Team will conduct interviews for the two internship positions. The interns will be hired for a twelve-week period between May and August 2008. The interns will work from the VHS offices at the Vermont History Center in Barre and will be supervised by the project director. They will also meet when needed with VMGA's Director of Collections Care. After an initial orientation about the project, the interns will review the survey. They will collect mailing and e-mail information from the project partners, eliminate duplicates, and develop the final contact lists. They will contact vendors, get estimates, and be responsible for overseeing the production of the printed surveys and its mailing. Consulting with VHS's Local Societies Outreach Manager, they will send the survey out via e-mail and create a webpage on the VHS website. The finished survey will be sent out by early June 2008. As recipients respond, the interns will complete data entry and management.

Throughout the summer the interns will attend events and workshops already scheduled by the partners to talk about the project, hand out surveys, and work on getting surveys completed and returned. One of these planned events is VHS's Vermont History Expo, a

weekend event in June where over 100 historical societies and museums present exhibits at the Tunbridge World Fairgrounds. In addition, VMGA will present several IMLS sponsored Collections Care Workshops during 2008. As we learn about other meetings or workshops, efforts will be made to include information about this project.

In July 2008, representatives from collecting institutions will be invited to six regional meetings to be held around the state (Burlington, Rutland, Windsor, Montpelier, St. Albans, and St. Johnsbury). The main goals of these meetings will be to complete additional surveys, to discuss possible ways to build future partnerships among the participants, and to receive local media attention. Members of the partnership organizations will be on hand to talk about the purpose of the survey and answer any questions about the project. The meetings will be held at and co-sponsored by a local museum, library, or local historical society if possible. We hope to have a representative from each region speak about a successful collections care story. The project director will work with local participants, as well as the partners, to garner as much media attention as possible and to invite local and state government representatives to attend.

During the summer the interns will travel around the state to various institutions that have asked for help or that haven't completed the surveys. During August they will enter all of the survey information collected to date. The consultant will write a preliminary draft analysis of the findings and determine if enough data has been collected. The goal is to receive surveys from 50% of the various collecting institutions. In early August 2008 the Collection Advisory Committee will meet to receive a report from the interns and consultant about how the project is going and to make recommendations as needed.

The Collections Advisory Committee will meet again in September 2008 to review the initial findings with the consultant. If more survey work is needed, committee members will be responsible for contacting more of their constituents to complete the survey. The consultant will draft a report on the survey findings in October. At the joint meeting of the League of Local Historical Societies and VMGA in early November 2008 the preliminary findings will be presented.

By late November 2008 a draft report on findings and recommendations prepared by the Project Team will be sent out to the Collections Advisory Committee for review and comment. Initial planning for a February 2009 summit will begin by the Project Team with input from the committee. The Summit is the forum during which the committee would publicly report its findings and make initial recommendations to legislators, private funders, and the media. The committee will meet with the consultant in January 2009 to review a final draft of the report and to see her PowerPoint presentation. Final plans will be made for the summit agenda, the list of attendees will be created, and invitation sent out by the middle of January.

The report will be sent to invited participants before the summit. At the meeting they will discuss its findings and decide what can be done to raise more awareness to help Vermont collecting institutions develop plans and actions for taking care of the collections they hold in public trust. After this meeting the project director will draft a

report and circulate it to the committee for review and comments before a final report is written.

A copy of the final report will be made available online and one thousand copies will be printed and distributed around the state in March 2009 to organizations that completed the survey, media outlets, local and state legislators, the governor, summit attendees, and other interested parties. The findings of the report will be used as a tool to justify future actions in the state, to secure funding, to raise awareness in local communities about the importance and the special needs of collecting institutions, and to build partnerships among varied institutions.

Budget figures in the grant were determined by comparing costs of similar projects for meetings, printing, travel, and mailings completed by VHS and VMGA. The fees for the consultant, Susan Wilkening, were determined by Wilkening and Eileen Corcoran after they discussed the project and Wilkening read the project narrative. Internship stipends are the current rate VHS pays for summer interns. It was determined that a portable computer would be an indispensable tool for the interns during the project. Salaries are based on the best estimates for time the Project Team expects to spend on the project. The members of the Collections Advisory Committee are very excited about this project since they have been involved with these various organizations and their collections needs for all of their careers. They are looking forward to working as partners and developing a plan and recommendations for helping their constituents with funding, training, and public awareness.